**Let it all Fall Down: Delighting in Anti-Heroes,
Alternative Heritage and Ruination**

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**The Unhappiest Place on Earth**

I deeply mourned the death of my favourite anti-hero, A.A. Gill. His *Sunday Times* column was always dazzlingly inventive. Back in the day, its sparkle was the only reason I bought the paper. Adrian’s writing stood out from that of his fellow journalists. He had an artful way with prose that few could emulate, and he was funny as hell. Moreover, his nihilistic outlook chimed well with my own once wantonly destructive sensibility. Prophetically, in his drink-sodden autobiography, *Pour Me a Life*, he claimed that he “prayed humbly and sincerely and without regret for an irrevocable death sentence. I didn’t ask from rage or irony, not to shake a fist at the uncaring heavens, but with honest sincerity. I prayed like a self-mortifying hermit for terminal cancer.” (Gill 2015, p. 26) In a cruel stroke of misfortune his prayers were answered.

What also appealed to me about Adrian was his love of the forlorn, for all that is sad and sorry in this world. His tendency to savour the worst that life can offer is best exemplified in his description of The Lindsey, a dilapidated underground drinking club in the west end of London where, by his own admission, he spent too many hours relishing its alternative heritage.

The place was coated with nicotine and despair. It was the most hopelessly sad and lonely room I’ve ever known. There were glazed windows with curtains, behind which was painted a Home Counties landscape, a wry trompe l’oeil that twisted the truth—we were in a cellar, a burrow, a tomb where the wounded, sodden, failed and frightened came to hide. On the wall there was a reproduction of a painting of eighteenth-century huntsmen enjoying a tale and a tincture in some amiable country hostelry. They were the bucolic English yeomen of yore, ruddy and true, loyal, jolly, prosperous and sturdy. The picture was a slap, a caution, a reminder of how far from the ideal of manhood and society I had fallen. All the coy sentimental attempts to cheer up the bar, tranquilize it with kitsch, the plastic flamenco dancers and china poodles, became the malevolent props of a horror movie…I loved it. I loved it because it was so perfectly tailored to me—a room I could look in the eye and know that it loved me right back.”

(Gill 2015, p. 9-11).

Curiously though, dilapidation, unless rendered in hyperreal retroscape style (Brown and Sherry 2003), is something neither heritage nor marketing – and by heritage, I mean, the practices and policies that organise our relationship to the material past – normally celebrate. Marketing’s obsession, after all, has ever been with the new and improved (Tedlow 1990; Patterson *et al.* 2008). Its thrust is often the creation of fantastic and amazing experiences that enchant and delight (Kawaski 2011). Lamentably, this usually entails being on trend with the contemporary whims of fashion and technology, even if the abiding concern is the preservation of heritage. The zeal to embrace augmented reality to showcase how things once were, is just one such example. Having digested a lifetime’s exposure to such thinking, a marketer might well be set on entrancing consumers with a multi-sensory experience where service exceeds expectations and the customer is King. The tacit goal, it seems, is to aspire to Disneyland’s credo of creating new spaces that each aspire to be ‘The Happiest Place on Earth’. For their part, when heritage advocates deem something historic to be of value their default instinct is to preserve and conserve. DiSilvey (2007, p. 2) vividly describes how the heritage industry might attempt to save a crumbling building. Actions are enacted to “strip off the ivy, repoint the mortar, clear the base, and install an informational plaque with a potted history to justify the expense of intervention. The structure would be infilled with official memory and asked to perform as an object of heritage.”

Only on the scholarly fringes, in the ill-lit shadows, will you find glum contributors to obscure books about cultural heritage fraternising with scholars revelling in the study of dark tourism and other seedy consumption practices (Sharpley and Stone 2009). It is here that we consider the significance of atypical consumers exemplified by the dear departed A.A. Gill. Those who prefer to elope from the sterility of business ready units in favour of lamentably dishevelled venues like The Lindsey, whose grimy authenticity they find more appealing. The faux distressed wood in a hipster barber shop, the exposed network of metal pipes in the ceiling of a trendy eatery, or the fake water-stained rings on a theme pub’s tables are anathema to them. These wretched few belong in the ‘Unhappiest Place on Earth’, where perversely they will be content, or at least more content than they would otherwise have been.

Nonetheless, the question of why this should be so has been little addressed. While critical heritage studies in relation to alternative heritage tend to focus on the much worthier subject of the plight of the marginalised and disenfranchised (Winter 2013), this chapter seeks purely to explain its allure. Taking advantage of the freedom that writing a book chapter allows it in part focuses on a literary consideration of its popularity by periodically reflecting on the musing of Gill and others. Ultimately, I suggest that those appreciative of alternative heritage have three qualities in common: an interest in *retroscendence*, *impoverished enrichment* and *catharsis*. I conclude by hoping that the ‘heritage industry’ will in future, on occasion at least, just let it all fall down (Hewison 1987).

**Retroscendence**

I first encountered the concept of ‘retroscendence’ while reading Will Self’s (1993) fabulously off-kilter debut novel, *My Idea of Fun*. Appropriately enough, much like the heritage hovels celebrated in this chapter, it could easily offend pusillanimous readers. There is a shockingly graphic scene in the opening few pages, much too vulgar to recount in these well-mannered pages that might leave you questioning your choice of reading material. Written in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, the book tells the tale of how an impressionable young apprentice is schooled in marketing’s dark art by a wily grandmaster, none too charmingly called ‘The Fat Controller’. One of the memorable lessons he teaches is the ‘fun’ activity of retroscending. While not without an uncanny otherworldly dimension, akin to travelling back through time, the concept essentially “enables us to take any element in our visual field and, as it were, unpack its history” (p. 110). He further elaborates that the technique makes it “possible to enter into the very history of a product, any product, the Porsche or the crisp packet, and flow down its evolutionary folkways, zoom back to the point where it was as yet undifferentiated, unpositioned, unintentional, and therefore not about anything” (p. 212).

While reflecting on Gill’s strong kinship with The Lindsey, it struck me that he calls forth on something like retroscendence. He certainly reflects deeply on its convoluted history. Declaring, for instance, “the Lindsey hadn’t always been like this, it too had a past, had aspirations. Once it was a theater club, a soigné stage for amateur and professional rising talent. The young Dirk Bogarde had played the Lindsey, the yellowing poster was here to prove it.” (p. 11) His ability to retroscend, to appreciate the complete weight of its history and its interwoven concatenations, partially explains why it means so much to him. Its current state of shabbiness is made more poignant when armed with full knowledge of its once illustrious past. Its corrosion also parallels the breakdown of his own body which age, time and ill-treatment have withered. Being in such a place can thus initiate a dichotomous process of moving from the past to the present wherein spatial and bodily memories collide. This in turn prompts a deep yearning and sense of profundity that can be quite agreeable to the contemplative sensorium (Robinson 2005). And it that all seems too much like abstract metaphysical babble, well then do not take my word for it. Read instead how the poet Shelley perfectly evokes the bittersweet wistfulness of such affectivity:

We look before and after,

And pine for what is not:

Our sincerest laughter

With some pain is fraught;

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Elsewhere is has been noted that retro-consumption in retroscapes produces retro-flection, but until now the interplay between memory and emotion provoked by retroscendence has perhaps been understated (Patterson and Brown 2003).

**Impoverished Enrichment**

Understanding what I prefer to call *impoverished enrichment*, otherwise identified as the ‘slumming it’ movement, can also help explain the attraction of alternative heritage settings (Frenzel *et al.* 2012; Frenzel 2016). Controversially, authentic ‘slummers’ literally seek to experience the thrill of spending time in the slums of places like Brazil and India. While such behaviour can be beneficial to the residents by perhaps bringing badly needed revenue into the community, often the incursion of mostly white Northern tourists casts them as “victims of the voyeuristic tourist gaze” (Frenzel 2016, p. 12). The continued existence of the Pom Mahakan community in the centre of Bangkok serves as an example of just such an ambiguous co-existence between residents and tourists. The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority consider the place a slum and have been trying to bulldoze it for years to make way for the creation of a new heritage zone in the city. Interest shown by tourists is the only remaining obstacle that stops this from occurring. While the residents would perhaps like to get on with living their lives, to ensure that this alternative heritage site is not destroyed, they must continually sustain the tourist impulse by organising festivals and guided tours (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015).

My concept of impoverished enrichment though is less bound up with notions of colonialism or postcolonial reclamation. For me, it encapsulates the rise of DIY global backpacking tours where little is preplanned. You might sleep in a hostel one night and under the stars on another. The term describes the on-the-edge amateurs who undertake life-threatening mountain climbs. Though it is not just about near-death adventures. It can also capture the essence of what it is like to spend time in a grim ramshackle pub. The Urban Dictionary (2018) details a humorous first-person, though not altogether unproblematic, example of slumming behaviour: “Went incognito up to the council estate and visited a public house doing Karaoke. Smoked forty fags, sang five songs, ate fish and chips and made out with a single parent mother.”

Impoverished enrichment also has some affinity with what Douglas Copeland (1991, p. 137) labels, ‘Underdogging’. In *Generation X* he describes it as “the tendency to almost invariably side with the underdog in a given situation. The consumer expression of this trait is the purchasing of less successful, ‘sad’, or failing products.” This is certainly something that everyday consumers do. Intent on exploring this theme, recently I asked in an online forum whether anyone had ever bought something they felt sorry for. Among the many emotive responses was this delightful example:

I have quite often bought the last item of something from a shop simply because it “looked lonely”. I did it the other day with some croissants. I wanted to buy four, but that would have meant there was one left on the display. I couldn't bear the thought that I had taken away all its friends and it would be left there all alone, so I bought the 5th one too!

I know it’s irrational, and I can see how it’s a (blatantly obvious) projection of my own concerns. And yet these feelings continue to affect me.

While impoverished enrichment might seem far away from the moral quandary of whether or not to buy a lonely croissant, there is a high probability that it will place you in the vicinity of other destitute objects or people. And rather than turn away from them, often our natural human instinct to protect the vulnerable and weak will kick in. By way of illustration, Gill tells a moving story in his autobiography about meeting a boy who:

sidled up to me in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional in Havana and asked if I wanted to buy a bootleg tape of Cuban music… I didn’t want the tape, but I asked the boy if he would like dinner and to tell me about his life here. He’d never eaten a steak before. All his school friends had piled onto an oil drum raft during the small window that a petulant Castro had offered to people who wanted to leave Cuba to get to Florida, ninety miles away. The boy had got as far as the shore, but didn’t go with them because he lost his nerve and worried about his mother. It was the worst decision of my life,” he said. Now he spent hours on his bed feeling his life drift away and listened to American radio and dreamed about the parallel existence that might have been his in America.

A tendency to rejoice in ruinscapes also resonates with the notion of ‘ironic consumption’, where the idea is that ‘the place is so bad that it’s good’. It might have a detestable component, something that singles it out as being, what Thompson (2002, p. 133) describes as, “the absolute, epiphanic apogee of awfulness”, but it is appreciated and loved all the more for it. In a memorable line from the movie, Ghost World, a central character’s appreciative comment about a naff 50s diner, perfectly epitomises the sentiment: “This is so bad it’s gone past good and back to bad again.” In relation to bad experiences that are paradoxically good, Gill (2015, p. 9) found the extremely poor customer service he experienced in the Lindsey not so much objectionable as endearing. Affectionately, he notes that “Rita [the club owner] was permanently disapproving; she despised her customers as failed, pathetic specimens.” Putting up with such a lot, contradicts normal everyday expectations to such a degree, that amid the general ruination and ill-treatment, the few serendipitous purple moments that are gleaned become extremely precious, exclusive and therefore sought after.

**Catharsis**

Life in the First World where most readers of this book live is no picnic. News is invariably grim. Day and daily we hear of the suffering that exposure to neoliberal ideals engenders among consumers. Regression with little in the way of progression is the story of our times. For its part, consumer and marketing research often characterises life as a scavenge through loveless lulls and days best forgotten (Shankar et al. 2006). As such, consumers are viewed as hedonists seeking to eke out of life what little joy and happiness they can muster (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Unsurprisingly, research of a managerial bent is thus firmly intent upon creating customer experiences that are typically described as ‘super’, ‘fun’, ‘excellent’, ‘unforgettable’ and ‘brilliant’.

All of this is true.

And yet, there are those among us who prefer something deeper, more profound. Trite experiential marketing goals like those listed above, do not begin to capture the experience that some seek. There are those among us who actually enjoy wallowing in the misery of modern life. Eagle-eyed media commentators have begun to call such folk aficionados of “grief porn” (Warhurst 2014). They are said to have intensely emotional reactions to artworks – say a painting by Rothko, or a movie like the much-loved but tear-inducing opening scene in Pixar’s *Up* (Elkins 2001). By the same token, they are likely to come over all lachrymose upon succumbing to the social media ‘clickbait’ that proliferates, such as the legion of cute animal videos on Facebook.

Such people are not emotional wrecks on the verge of mental breakdown. Really, what they seek are cathartic moments. Aristotle’s concept of catharsis describes the cleansing or ‘purification’ of the mind that crying by means of witnessing an enacted tragedy can induce. Catharsis, as a concept, it should be said, does not just refer to emotional release brought on by tragedy. It can also help explain our love of horror movies and the like, which admittedly are not for everyone. Or the rise of ‘dark tourism’ where people find perverse pleasure in learning about the anguish that has been wrought on mankind at various historical junctures. Cue the stream of tourists at Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, or at the House of Terror in Budapest. In addition, at the opposite end of the cathartic continuum, it can refer to the emotional release that elicits from the subversions of comedic entertainment.

It is well documented that heritage sites, especially those that are commercially-orientated, can offer significant opportunities to experience a heightened sense of emotional release. Research by Schramm (2007), for instance, who studied the effects of African-Americans returning to Ghana noted the cathartic nature of their experience when they visited commemorative slave sites. Gill (2015, p. 45) recounts a similarly cathartic moment while visiting a museum:

There is in all classical exhibits an overall, overwhelming sense of brokenness. Everything is a bit of something or is missing a bit. The recurring theme is not of creation but of destruction—you constantly try to repair the damage in your head, replace noses and arms, put back handles and spouts. We walked into a room and I burst into tears without warning. I was utterly overcome by sensation.

Ruminating in the aesthetics of such places heightens our susceptibility to the effect of affect (Weiss and Beal 2005). It can remind us of our mortality, the temporality of flesh and blood and all material objects. By helping to dislodge intransigent life perspectives that overlooks such thoughts, we experience catharsis.

**Exit Through the Gift Shop**

It is unfortunate that mainstream consumer and marketing researchers are not better acquainted with consumers who like to tarry in less than salubrious surrounding in search of retroscendence, impoverished enrichment and catharsis. Their natural disposition is to cater to the myth of normalcy (i.e. the mass market), where all reasonable, well-adjusted consumers are thought to reside. Theoretically at least, they espouse a wholesome ‘clean living’ ideology that marketers seek to mollify by creating a ‘decaffeinated’ reality, brimful of bland products like beer without alcohol, butter without butter and, of course, coffee without caffeine (Žižek 2002). Disciplines like heritage studies, whose latter-day push to become marketing-orientated have likewise become similarly smitten by the myth of catering to moderately-minded folk whose idea of fun is none is rather temperate (Misiura 2006). Thus, by osmosis the demonstrable focus of much of the thinking of marketing’s confrères frequently dwells on creating the inoffensive and bland. Consider, for instance, how Dickens World, which celebrated the life and work of Charles Dickens, was presented to its customers. The managing director placed the emphasis firmly on entertainment. He is quoted as saying: ‘Visitors are not going to come here to be depressed so our role is to entertain them. We’re not going to have starving babies crawling around on the cobblestones’ (Lukas 2008, p. 166). Consequently, the experience on offer was empty and anodyne. Little wonder it is now defunct.

The existence of such an insipid consumer world is self-evident, but as Diken (2009, p. 3) rightly contends it is “paradoxically accompanied in our culture with a ‘passion for the real’, a carving for passion and excitement… The imperative ‘Moderate’! goes hand in hand with another one, a desire for excitement, to feel life as vibrantly as possible.” Being aware that some consumers wish to occupy this space led the prankster artist, Banksy, to create a parody of Disneyland – Dismaland. Hailed in its promotional blurb as “the UKs most disappointing new visitor attraction’, this temporary installation is worth contemplating in light not only of how it skewers “utopian images depicting consumerist, neoliberal fantasies [which] substitute for reality in the modern world” (Moser 2017, p. 1046), but also for how it revels in its ‘aesthetics of ruin’ (Trigg 2009). I had the pleasure of visiting this artwork, and in the gift shop at the end, I eavesdropped on one visitor’s summation of the experience. He was evidently thrilled by the unvarnished grimness of the various installations saying, as I recall: ‘This is rubbish. I love it.’

This chapter serves as a counterpoint to those that assume cultural heritage is something that should necessarily sparkle and gleam with vitality. Its interest in always sprucing itself up with a lick of paint and a makeover and in protecting the public from the ugly reality of history can sometimes be self-defeating. Heritage should stay true to its decrepit and sometimes distressing core. For as Wilson (2012, p. 4) states: “We are enamoured of ruin. The deeper the darkness is, the more dazzling. Our secret and ecstatic wish: Let it all fall down.”

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